

News from Rep. Stephanie Herseth
For Immediate Release
Contact: Russ Levens, 202-226-4449

HERSETH SPEAKS OUT IN FAVOR OF MANDATORY COOL

Supports Amendment to End Delays, Give Producers Powerful Tool to Market their Product
June 8, 2005, Washington, D.C. – U.S. Rep. Stephanie Herseth spoke on the House floor earlier today in support of legislation to end delays in implementation of mandatory country-of-origin labeling. The amendment Herseth supports would strip language currently in the House Agriculture Appropriations bill to further delay implementation of a mandatory program. Herseth's comments are below:

Mr. Speaker, I rise in complete support of this amendment. I also rise with no small measure of frustration and exasperation that this amendment is even necessary today.

The 2002 Farm Bill made a promise to farmers and ranchers across this country. It promised them that the Secretary of Agriculture would implement a program to inform consumers where their meat and vegetables come from. Producers in South Dakota see tremendous potential in this program and urged its inclusion in the Farm Bill. In fact, had this provision not been in the bill, I think that many of them would not have supported its passage.

This promise was supposed to be fulfilled by September 30 of last year – the program should already be up and running. Instead, the large meat packers have rallied to kill this program because they do not want American consumers to discover how much of the meat in the grocery case is actually imported. And, these packing interests have found strong and willing allies here in this body. Two years ago, in an appropriations bill, Congress voted to delay the implementation of this program until September 30 of next year. Now we see that this two year delay was not enough for them. Their allies in this chamber are at it again today – seeking to delay implementation of this important program for yet another year.

This is unconscionable; and it is just the tip of the iceberg. Leadership in this body is breaking faith with Rural America on a host of important issues. The Administration is leading the fight to reopen our border to Canadian beef despite ongoing concerns about the safety of their beef supply, and over the strong objections of many U.S. ranchers and consumer groups.

Rural America is also under attack in the budget process. The 2007 Budget, which recently passed this body with only Republican votes, will cut \$3 billion dollars from farm safety net programs in the coming years. The President's budget was even worse, seeking a cut of almost \$6 billion dollars in farm bill programs. Because of this budget, the farm income safety net, conservation programs, and food stamps are now facing huge cuts in the coming years.

I see mandatory COOL legislation as a win-win situation, and no more delays are justified. It's a win for consumers, who get the security of knowing where their meat comes from. And it's a win for our producers, who can build a stronger marketplace for their meat based on the quality of the product.

And let's not forget that American consumers have shown overwhelming support for COOL. A nationwide poll taken last year found that 82 percent of consumers think food should be labeled with country-of-origin information; 85 percent said they would be more inclined to purchase U.S. products; and 81 percent said they would be willing to pay a few cents extra for food that is grown here at home. American consumers want the ability to be as informed about their food purchase decisions as they are about virtually all of the other consumer goods they purchase. Country-of-origin labeling gives them this tool and they support it.

Let's restore our commitment to Rural America. I urge my colleagues to support this amendment. A two year delay is long enough. Let's allow the Agriculture Secretary to fulfill the promise of the 2002 Farm Bill by giving producers the marketing tools that they need and consumers the information that they are seeking on the origin of the food they buy. Thank you and I yield the balance of my time.

#